

Education and Events Programme

Talks

Curators Talk / Dr Joanna Soden and Sandy Wood on James Cumming / Thursday 29 March 1pm
Curators of the RSA Collection Dr Joanna Soden and Sandy Wood will join Talbot Rice Gallery's Principal Curator Pat Fisher to explore the life and works of James Cumming. A significant number of the works in the James Cumming exhibition were gifted to the RSA by the artist's family.

Artists Talk / Alison Turnbull and Ross Birrell in conversation / Thursday 26 April 6-8pm
To coincide with the publication of the exhibition catalogue Alison Turnbull will discuss her work with artist, writer and lecturer Ross Birrell. Following the talk there will be an opportunity to have a glass of wine and purchase catalogues to be signed by the artist.

Lecture / Professor Chris Breward / The Power of British Art and Design / Wednesday 9 May 6.30pm
For 2012's Friends of Talbot Rice Gallery Annual Memorial Lecture, Professor Chris Breward will reflect on curating the V&A's major exhibition for the 2012 Olympic Season: *British Design 1948-2012: Innovation in the Modern Age*. The lecture will focus on the challenges raised by the project and suggest ways in which the British Art and Design College has been a key influence on how our culture has developed over the past six decades.

Tours

Artlink Tours / In the Loop - Tuesday 27 March 11am / In the Frame - Wednesday 28 March 11.30am
In the Loop is an audio assisted tour for visitors with hearing loss, In the Frame is a verbal description tour for visitors with a visual impairment. Join us for an introduction to the exhibitions with Zoë Fothergill, Curator, Education & Development and Rachel Thibbotumunuwe, Assistant Curator (Equality & Diversity). For booking please contact Susan at Artlink 0131 229 3555 option 1 or e-mail susan@artlinkedinburgh.co.uk.

Regular Talks / Wednesday Walkabout & Saturday Social / 1.15pm and 3pm
On Wednesdays at 1.15pm, join us for an informal half-hour talk presented by members of the gallery's team that is designed to fit into your lunch hour. Alternatively on Saturdays at 3pm, join Education Assistant Shawn Coulman for a relaxed introduction to our current exhibitions. Free events, no need to book, just turn up.

Workshop

BSL Workshop / Visual Connections with Mark MacQueen / Wednesday 18 April 6-8pm
This workshop will use the current exhibitions as a starting point to explore how the visual language of BSL connects with visual art. The workshop will be co-led by Zoë Fothergill, Curator, Education & Development and BSL storyteller and tutor Mark MacQueen. This event is for both Deaf and hearing participants, however, it will be most suitable for people with some interest in or knowledge of BSL, including those attending BSL classes. For booking please email Zoe.Fothergill@ed.ac.uk

At our events a portable FM hearing loop is available for visitors who are hard of hearing - please contact the gallery in advance to book the equipment. A large print version of this guide is available at the reception desk and if you require this document in an alternative format please contact the gallery.

All events run by the gallery are free and unless stated otherwise should be booked by:
Email: info.talbotrice@ed.ac.uk Tel: 0131 650 2210 or In person: Reception Desk, Talbot Rice Gallery, Old College, South Bridge, Edinburgh, EH8 9YL

James Cumming

10 March – 5 May 2012

Tuesday - Saturday 10am - 5pm
Admission Free



Talbot Rice Gallery
THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH

“James Cumming’s unique and unmistakable style and his stature as an artist made him a major figure in Scottish painting for over thirty years. The pictorial language he created evolved out of Post-Cubism and produced an idiom of expressive distortions within a powerfully controlled structure and impeccable craftsmanship. His colour sense could be strangely beautiful and haunting, the paintings wrought with immense care - a French belle-peinture of its own.”

The Independent, 28 January 1991

Including rarely seen works this exhibition celebrates the achievements of James Cumming (1922-1991) RSA, RSW. In addition to paintings from every decade of his career, sketchbooks and preparatory materials reflect the level of research and design that enriched his work. Cumming’s approach to art, which has been described as ‘part-archaeological, part-sociologically-scientific’, was exacting and erudite. As art gallery of the University of Edinburgh, Talbot Rice is pleased to showcase the work of an artist, and tutor at Edinburgh College of Art, who was such a distinctive figure in Scottish art.

James Cumming was born and educated in Dunfermline. His studies at Edinburgh College of Art were interrupted by the Second World War when he trained as a pilot in Texas and flew missions to India. In New York he absorbed post-cubist painting, in Jaipur he looked at Indian miniatures. The painting titled *Laredo, Texas* (1986) depicts the Texan town from both within and without: as a maze of strips and plazas deserted in the baking heat, but also as if seen from the skies in Cumming’s Dakota, each metaphor abstracted from memory decades later.

Cumming’s best-known artistic phase, in the early 1960s, came from a year and more in the Outer Hebrides. Other postgraduates who won travelling scholarships after the war spent them on a couple of months in Europe studying the old masters. Cumming chose the remote village of Callanish on Lewis, where the community is close and constantly aware of the past, embodied by the ominous standing stones on the outskirts. The artist lived with the crofters, taught their children, painted the local poachers, fishermen and worthies, among them men and women supposedly gifted with prophetic powers transmitted down the ages. In his paintings, the islanders become spectral figures, individual and yet mythic, one and continuous with the landscapes through which they pass. *The Hebridean Boatman* (1962) in his old plimsolls is pale as the sea light. *Grey Kenneth* (1960), his name in Gaelic, is a vision of the Brahan Seer, that long-dead islander said to have predicted the birth of Picasso and the discovery of North Sea oil centuries in advance. *The Woman with Second Sight* (1962) appears seated among the whitewashed crofts, defensive as a hermit crab. Her mysterious gift is embodied in her moon-like eyes.

At this stage Cumming had already hit on the technique he would refine throughout his career. His semi-figurative paintings are built up in veils of translucent colour, slow and painstaking glazes underpinned by pivotal details – buttons, fingernails, pinpricks of reflected light – and founded upon complex rhythmic structures. The Hebridean paintings were shown in Edinburgh, London and New York in the sixties but at the peak of their success Cumming suddenly switched subject. His neighbour, an Edinburgh surgeon, had introduced him to the new electron microscope. Always fascinated by origins and by microcosms – the sketchbooks are full of these connections, the movements of the solar system repeated in the spirals of a fir cone, and so on – he could literally see the world, now, in a grain of sand.

In paintings such as *Ovule* (1971) and *Poised Encounter* (c. 1970-1975), organisms scintillate on the surface of the painting like cells on a slide or planets in the sky. Gathering and dividing, they breed new forms and these invented bio-morphs each have an energetic character of their own. Also the glowing yellow *Chromosomes (I)* (1970) with its array of vital symbols, in the artist’s vision, each little figure has larger affinities - moons, animals, faces, the dancing K-shape in the middle, both hieroglyph and letter. It is a work of exaltation, in praise of what science had lately revealed: that the universal calligraphy turned out to be present even in the code of human life itself.

Music and medical science, outer space, myths and old movies: the diversity of Cumming’s interests is apparent even in this condensed selection of his work. But what connects everything is his commitment to drawing. The sketchbooks are a lifelong exploration of the immense variety of forms a single line can take, and *Sumerian Source* (1985) has its origins in the earliest form of writing, cuneiform script, beginning with the briefest of lines (a dot) and taking off in all directions. Cumming’s drawing is at its most minimal in geometric abstracts such as *Laredo, Texas* (1986) and *Cathedrale Englouti* (1987), where the mythical drowned cathedral is refined to bone white structure; and it is at its most romantic in the still lifes.